

Message Text

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PAGE 01 DAMASC 03978 261059Z

ACTION NEA-10

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3648

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN STEPS TOWARD A NUCLEAR FUTURE

REF: (A) DAMASCUS 1986; (B) STATE 75915; (C) STATE 97226

1. SUMMARY: DURING THE PAST YEAR, THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT HAS TAKEN A NUMBER OF STEPS TOWARDS DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE NUCLEAR ENERGY PROGRAM. THE GOVERNMENT HAS FORMED AN ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION, IS SEEKING A NUCLEAR MEDICAL RESEARCH FACILITY, DESIRES TO BUILD A 600MW NUCLEAR POWER PLANT, AND HAS TALKED TO US AND FOREIGN OFFICIALS AND PRIVATE EXPERTS ABOUT TECHNOLOGICAL SUPPORT AND POSSIBLE FINANCING. WE BELIEVE IT IS TIME FOR USG TO BEGIN SHAPING A RESPONSE TO THESE SYRIAN AMBITIONS. END SUMMARY.

2. SOMETIME IN 1976, SYRIA ESTABLISHED AN ENERGY COMMITTEE WITHIN THE SUPREME COUNCIL OF SCIENCES (A SYRIAN GOVERNMENT AGENCY),
UNCLASSIFIED

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PAGE 02 DAMASC 03978 261059Z

UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE PRIME MINISTER. DR. IBRAHIM HADDAD, A DISTINGUISHED PHYSICIST AND VICE-RECTOR OF DAMASCUS UNIVERSITY, IS HEAD OF THE ENERGY COMMITTEE AND HAS BEEN DESIGNATED HEAD OF ITS ATOMIC ENERGY SUBCOMMITTEE. DR. HADDAD IS CURRENTLY WINDING UP HIS AFFAIRS AT THE UNIVERSITY IN PREPARATION OF ASSUMING HIS NEW, FULL-TIME DUTIES. WE UNDERSTAND DR. HADDAD ACCOMPANIED PRESIDENT

ASAD ON HIS JUNE, 1976 VISIT TO FRANCE AND THERE DISCUSSED WITH FRENCH OFFICIALS POSSIBLE COOPERATION IN NUCLEAR ENERGY PROJECTS. HE ALSO TOOK PART IN AN INTERNATIONAL ATOMIC ENERGY CONFERENCE IN BRAZIL IN 1976.

3. IN MARCH, 1977, EMBASSY LEARNED OF A POSSIBLE COMMERCIAL TRADE OPPORTUNITY STEMMING FROM SYRIAN DESIRE TO PURCHASE A SMALL NUCLEAR REACTOR FOR THE PURPOSE OF CREATING RADIOCHEMICALS FOR MEDICAL RESEARCH. EMBASSY REPORT AND STATE RESPONSE ARE GIVEN IN REFTELS. (EARLIER, IN MAY 1976, THE SYRIAN MINISTRY OF PLANNING APPROACHED USAID TO REQUEST THE SENDING OF TWO US NUCLEAR MEDICAL SPECIALISTS TO DAMASCUS TO WORK AT THE CENTER; USAID EXPRESSED WILLINGNESS TO WORK OUT SOME LIMITED TECHNICAL ADVISORY, SERVICES OR TRAINING BUT THE SYRIANS DID NOT FOLLOW UP*); A REPRESENTATIVE OF A MAJOR US SUPPLIER, GENERAL ATOMIC, ARRIVED IN DAMASCUS IN APRIL TO DISCUSS THE PROJECT WITH SYRIAN MEDICAL OFFICIALS. HE LATER TOLD COMOFF THAT THE DISCUSSIONS WENT VERYWELL, AND HE WAS CONFIDENT THAT HIS FIRM'S "TRIGA" REACTORS, WHICH USED ONLY 20 PERCENT ENRICHED FUEL, COULD NOT BE USED FOR PRODUCING WEAPONS MATERIAL AND THEREFORE WOULD MEET ANY NEW USG EXPORT STANDARDS. HE ALSO SAID HIS FIRM MIGHT BE ABLE TO ASSIST IN FINANCING THE SYRIAN PURCHASE OF THE REACTOR.

4. MINISTER OF ELECTRICITY AHMED AMAR YOUSSEF TOLD UNCLASSIFIED

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PAGE 03 DAMASC 03978 261059Z

AMBASSADOR APRIL 9 THAT SYRIA IS PLANNING TO BUILD A 600 MW NUCLEAR POWER STATION WITHIN ABOUT TEN YEARS. ALTHOUGH SYRIA HAS FOR THE MOMENT A SURPLUS OF CONVENTIONAL POWER CAPACITY (HYDROELECTRIC AND THERMAL) AND EVEN EXPORTS SOME POWER TO JORDAN AND LEBANON, ITS INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT PLANS (WHICH INCLUDE LARGE POWER CONSUMERS SUCH AS CHEMICAL AND FERTILIZER PLANTS) WILL REQUIRE CONSIDERABLE NEW SOURCES OF POWER GENERATION. THE MINISTER SAID THAT A GOVERNMENT GROUP (PRESUMABLY THE ATOMIC ENERGY SUBCOMMITTEE MENTIONED IN PARA 2 ABOVE) IS STUDYING THE MATTER AND HAS DETERMINED THAT NUCLEAR POWER GENERATION WILL BE ABOUT 25 PERCENT CHEAPER THAN THERMAL GENERATION. MINISTER OF ELECTRICITY HAS ALSO REITERATED THIS INTERESTED TO USAID, ALTHOUGH AID FINANCING IS NOT AVAILABLE FOR FUNDING NUCLEAR PROJECTS.

5. MINISTRY OF ELECTRICITY, UNIVERSITY, AND NUCLEAR MEDIAL OFFICIAL HAVE INFORMALLY DISCUSSED WITH RECENT USIS-SPONSORED VISITORS TO SYRIA POSSIBILITIES OF APPLYING NUCLEAR TECHNOLOGY TO POWER GENERATION AND MEDICAL RESEARCH. THESE VISITORS HAVE INCLUDED ANGELO GIAMBUSSO, DEPUTY ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR OF ERDA, OCTAVE DUTEMPLE, PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN NUCLEAR SOCIETY,

AND JOHN LAWRENCE, FOUNDER OF BERKELEY'S LAWRENCE LABORATORY.

6. THE SYRIANS HAVE APPROACHED THE SOVIETS ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS TO PROVIDE NUCLEAR POWER STATIONS. THE SOVIETS REJECTED SYRIAN REQUESTS IN 1974 AND 1975 ON THE GROUNDS OF TECHNICAL FEASIBILITY. THE INITIAL TECHNICAL OBJECTION WAS THAT A SINGLE LARGE PLANT, WHEN SHUT DOWN FOR MAINTENANCE, WOULD DISLOCATE ELECTRIC POWER DISTRIBUTION. IN 1976 AND AGAIN IN 1977 THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT REVISED ITS REQUEST TO MEET SOVIET OBJECTIONS BUT IT WAS AGAIN REJECTED. THE HEAD OF THE SOVIET ECONOMIC MISSION IN DAMASCUS TOLD REPORTING OFFICERS THAT SOVIET POSITION ON THIS MATTER IS CONDITIONED AS MUCH BY THE OVERALL MAXIMUM LEVEL OF SOVIET AID AS WELL AS BY ANY OTHER CONSIDERATIONS
UNCLASSIFIED

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PAGE 04 DAMASC 03978 261059Z

TECHNICAL OR POLITICAL. SIMILARLY, A FRENCH EMBASSY OFFICIAL TOLD THE COMMOFF THAT FRANCE HAS NO PLANS AT PRESENT TO ASSIST SYRIA IN DEVELOPING A NUCLEAR POWER GENERATING CAPACITY.

7. THESE DEVELOPMENTS STRONGLY SUGGEST THAT SYRIA HAS MADE AT LEAST A TENTATIVE DECISION TO SERIOUSLY EXPLORE THE POSSIBILITIES OF DEVELOPING A NUCLEAR CAPACITY FOR PEACEFUL PURPOSES, INCLUDING MEDICAL RESEARCH AND POWER GENERATION. DESPITE THE MINISTER OF ELECTRICITY'S CONVICTION THAT ATOMIC POWER PLANTS WILL IN THE LONG RUN PROVE ECONOMICIAL, THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NUCLEAR CAPACITY REMAINS FOR SYRIA AN EXPENSIVE PROPOSAL. LACKING TRAINED NUCLEAR TECHNICIANS AND PHYSICISTS AND A LOCALLY-GENERATED CAPITAL SURPLUS FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, SYRIA MUST DEPENDS UPON FOREIGN SOURCES FOR MONEY AND TALENT IN DEVELOPING A NUCLEAR CAPABILITY. TENTATIVE APPROACHES TO THE FRENCH AND SOVIETS DO NOT AS YET APPEAR TO HAVE BORNE FRUIT. SYRIAN DESIRE FOR A SMALL AMERICA COMMERCIAL REACTOR FOR MEDICAL RESEARCH, AND THE SYRIAN MINISTER OF ELECTRICITY'S FORTHCOMING EXPLANATION TO THE AMBASSADOR OF HIS COUNTRY'S AMBITION TO DEVELOP A NUCLEAR POWER-GENERATING CAPACITY INDICATE STRONG SYRIAN INTEREST IN THE U.S. AS A POTENTIAL SUPPLIER OF NUCLEAR TECHNOLOGY AND HARDWARE FOR PEACEFUL USES. WE BELIEVE IT IS TIME FOR THE DEPARTMENT TO BEGIN FORMULATING A COMPREHENSIVE RESPONSE, WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE DELICATE, EVOLVING POLITICAL SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE NEW ADMINISTRATION'S ATTITUDE ON THE EXPORT OF NUCLEAR TECHNOLOGY, TO THESE SYRIAN AMBITIONS. WE SEE STRONG COMMERCIAL POSSIBILITIES FOR U.S. FIRMS IN THIS SECTOR, BUT FIRST WE NEED DEPARTMENT GUIDANCE ON HOW TO PROCEED.
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